

# REACHING OUT to the BEREAVED

Story by Heike Hasenauer

**S***IX months to the day after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, family members and friends of 21-year-old CPL Matthew A. Commons bid their final farewells to him at his Arlington National Cemetery gravesite.*

The site is near the section where many victims of the Pentagon attack are buried, said Kerry Sullivan, a Military District of Washington spokeswoman.

Beyond the field of marble grave-stones, cranes could be seen continuing their construction work at the almost-repaired Pentagon, and occasionally a jet destined for Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport flew over the solemn crowd of mourners.

Among them were two soldiers who didn't know Commons, but will, undoubtedly, not soon be forgotten by his loved ones. One delivered the heart-wrenching news of his death. The other helped the family understand paperwork requirements and plan the funeral and burial services.

The two, CPT George Antone and 1LT Craig George, are members of the Military District of Washington's Casualty Area Command at Fort Myer, Va. It's one of 37 CACs Armywide, said LTC Rita Salley, chief of U.S. Total Army Personnel Command's Casualty Operations Division.

Antone, the command's chief of casualty and mortuary affairs, has alternately served as casualty-notification officer and casualty-assistance officer for about two years. He notified Commons' family of his death. Commons was the youngest of four soldiers who died March 4 during intense fighting in Afghanistan.

An M203 gunner, Commons had recently celebrated his 21st birthday. And he'd been in the Army only 18 months when the Chinook helicopter he was in landed in the middle of a

firefight against al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

When the U.S. Total Army Personnel Command received word of the deaths, its Casualty Operations Division contacted CACs closest to the families to request that their CNOs deliver the tragic news, Salley said.

Today the news is no less painful to hear than it was during the early years of the Vietnam War, when the Army had no certified death-notification or assistance program, and taxi drivers were commissioned to notify families, Salley said.

But the officers and senior non-commissioned officers designated to go to the homes of casualties today are equipped to offer them much more than the quick, brutal bottom line.

It's the CNOs' and CAOs' own military experiences that allow them to be strong, but compassionate, said Antone.

"Before I walked up to the home of Matt's father, I thought carefully about what I was going to say. It doesn't get any easier over time," said Antone, who's delivered the news of death about 20 times. "I approach it from the standpoint of how I'd want someone else to break the news to my wife if I got killed.

"I usually say, 'On behalf of the secretary of the Army, I regret to inform you ... You have my deepest condolences ...,' " Antone said. After they've had a moment to grasp the news, he answers as many of their questions as he can, without speculating. Usually, the family's first concerns are about the circumstances of



BG Richard Mills, deputy commanding general of U.S. Army Special Operations Command, presented CPL Matthew A. Commons' parents with the Purple Heart, Bronze Star for Valor and Meritorious Service Medal that were awarded to their son posthumously.

Ssg Alberto Betancourt



As this staged scene depicts, the casualty-notification officer is the first person to break the news of a service member's death to a loved one.

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the soldier's death and where the remains are located.

"You never know how someone will react," said George, who became casualty assistance officer to Commons' family 24 hours after they got the news. He's also notified families of a soldier's death.

"Some people will start screaming when they see you coming. They just know something is seriously wrong when a uniformed soldier comes to their door," George said.

"The first thing I do is verify who I'm talking to, to ensure I don't give the news to a visiting neighbor," said Antone. If the person he's identified as the primary next of kin or person authorized to direct disposition is alone, "I wait until they call someone to come and be with them. I stay as long as they need me. I know they'll tell me when they want me to leave."

After that day, the family usually doesn't see the CNO again, because they associate that person with the bad news, Antone said.

According to regulation, a CAO visits the primary next of kin within 24 hours after they've been notified of the death. He helps the family do everything from planning funeral and burial services to filing necessary paperwork for survivor benefits and protecting the bereaved family's privacy.

The CAO is expected to know enough about various religions to be sensitive to their edicts, and enough

about such things as unpaid pay and allowances, veterans affairs, social security, state benefits and the Survivor Benefit Plan to be able to talk intelligently about them to survivors.

When the next of kin is a dependent, the CAO has to know where and how to obtain a new identification card that will allow the next of kin to continue using post exchange, commissary and medical treatment facilities, Antone said.

The CAO helps the family file the paperwork for the standard \$6,000 death-gratuity payment made to the primary family member — a blood relative, by regulation — of every soldier killed on active duty. The payment, usually made within 72 hours of death notification, helps defray burial costs, Antone said.

Often, it's the CAO who presents the check, and it's not always easily accepted, he said. Sometimes the person who receives it is hostile, viewing the payment as an attempt by the Army to compensate for the family's loss.

## Tragedy Assistance

ANYONE who has been affected by the death of an active-duty soldier killed in the line of duty is eligible to receive 24-hour assistance through the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors.

The national, nonprofit organization provides free services, including a peer support group, grief- and trauma-counseling referral, stress management through case-worker assistance, financial planning information and more.

An annual military survivor seminar and quarterly newsletter are also provided. — Heike Hasenauer



*APS counselors may  
be reached by  
calling toll free  
(800) 959-TAPS,  
or by visiting [www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org).*



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As a representative of the secretary of the Army — "to render all reasonable assistance required to settle the personal affairs of a missing or deceased soldier" — the CAO must be sensitive to such emotions, Salley said. At the same time, the CAO must keep the association with the family on a professional level at all times. Refraining from getting personally involved during the family's period of grief may be the toughest part of the job.

The CAO's duties extend from 24 hours after the initial visit to approximately 90 days after the burial, roughly the time it takes for entitlements and benefits to be processed, Salley said.

"But, in nearly every case, casualty-assistance officers stay in contact with the family for a very long time. It's not unusual for lifelong relationships to develop between the CAOs and the bereaved families with whom they work so closely," she added.

The CAO's first job is to determine the family's immediate needs or problems. If financial assistance is needed, for example, the CAO would arrange a visit with Army Emergency Relief or American Red Cross workers, Salley said.

If the family's overwhelmed by funeral arrangements, the CAO might become involved in coordinating transportation and accommodations for relatives and friends arriving for the funeral and burial services, she said.

Hundreds of people gathered to pay their last respects to Commons. His divorced parents, stepmother, brother and two half-brothers were there. So were members of the clergy from his hometown church in Boulder City, Nev., and his father's church in Virginia.

While most of the soldiers from his unit, the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger

**As in this re-enactment, casualty-assistance officers such as 1LT Craig George visit the family within 24 hours after the notification of the soldier's death.**

Regiment, from Hunter Army Airfield, Ga., were still in Afghanistan, some 1st Bn. soldiers were there. Others represented the regiment's 3rd Bn.

High-ranking officials also often attend Arlington burials. Then specific protocol procedures come into play.

Army Chief of Staff GEN Eric K. Shinseki paid his respects at Commons' burial service, as did BG Richard Mills, commander of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command.

Mills presented Commons' parents with the Purple Heart, Bronze Star for

Paul Disney



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## Who's Eligible?

CASUALTY notification and assistance is provided to the next of kin of active-duty soldiers, reserve-component soldiers on active duty, soldiers who have been listed as absent without leave, soldiers who have not yet been out of the Army for 120 days after discharge, Army retirees, Department of the Army civilians on overseas assignment or temporary-duty status, and overseas dependents.

"Casualty" refers to someone who is killed, injured or missing.

— Heike Hasenauer



Soldiers of the 75th Ranger Regiment (center) pay their last respects to CPL Matthew A. Commons as he is laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery.

valor and Meritorious Service Medal, all awarded posthumously to their son. He'd also been posthumously promoted to corporal.

Antone and George will perform the roles of CNO and CAO, alternately, while they're assigned to the CAC for a standard two- to three-year tour of duty. Yet the duties are often performed by officers and senior NCOs who are not members of a CAC, but who are trained by CAC personnel and called upon when a particular CAC can't handle its workload alone.

Such was the case following the Sept. 11 Pentagon attack. The CAC then depended on people trained in casualty procedures to help train additional CNOs and CAOs, said Antone, because so many of the victims' families live in the area. The 11-member MDW CAC includes two officers, an NCO, a civilian mortuary officer and seven administrative personnel.

Compounding the need for help was the fact that the Department of Defense extended CNO and CAO services to the families of DOD civilian employees and contractors injured or killed in the Pentagon attack. That assistance is offered on a case-by-case basis to civilians, Salley said, but generally applies only when a DOD employee is killed or injured while assigned overseas, or on temporary-duty status.

Anyone unfamiliar with casualty and mortuary affairs regulations and

procedures might well wonder how CAOs learn all there is to know, Salley said. But the CACs have formal training programs and refresher courses.

Antone and George incorporate information from Army Regulation 600-8-1, "Casualty Reporting, Notification and Assistance," AR 638-2, "Care and Disposition of Remains and Disposition of Personal Effects," and a casualty-assistance officers guide published by PERSCOM's Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Center.

Subject-matter experts, videos and the casualty-affairs officer's own firsthand experiences are also used to teach others to do what PERSCOM officials have described as two of the most demanding jobs in the Army, Antone said.

"It's not easy to be the bearer of bad news or witness a family's pain over a period of weeks or months," Antone said. The CAO's satisfaction comes from knowing he or she prevents the families' further grief by providing timely, accurate information and shouldering some of the overwhelming demands they face at a most critical time in their lives.

"When it's over, the actions of the CNO and CAO often form the last impression the survivors will have of the Army," Salley said. That impression should be that the Army is professional and strong, but compassionate and caring as well. □